

FROM THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S DESK

Planning a successful AGM

By Graeme Charles

Some months ago, I attended the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Herd Improvement Co-operative (Maffra).

Maffra Herd Improvement has a membership of around 600 and the AGM would have been attended by well over half of these.

The AGM was just one part of an evening of celebration and fellowship enjoyed by the members. The evening's events included a dinner, complete with after-dinner speeches and entertainment.

It was a great evening and I'm sure the members went home with nothing but warm feelings about their co-operative and its importance.

A co-operative's AGM is often the only regular event that brings members together. While the official purpose is to conduct co-operative business, the AGM can also serve to reinforce members' feelings of ownership, belonging and trust in their co-operative.

But, how do you increase attendance at AGMs and



send members home with positive feelings about their co-operative?

I thought I would share the following tips for holding successful AGMs, taken from a 'What Works' survey conducted by the Co-operative Communicators Association in the US. I realise they might not all be appropriate for your co-operative, but hope you might find some worthwhile considering.

Some ideas that work for co-operatives in the US include: scheduling top-notch entertainment, planning a delicious meal and selecting desirable door prizes. According to the survey, such activities can transform a required business meeting into a social event that members appreciate and remember.

Free food

Most co-operatives serve a meal before or after the meeting, and the correlation between food and attendance is unmistakable, according to those co-operatives surveyed. It appears the quality of the food makes a difference, too.

- Penasco Valley Telephone Co-operative in New Mexico serves a nice meal with white tablecloths. Members have appreciated the extra effort, with

Managers should get the recognition they deserve

The Federation is having discussions with a Victorian-based registered training organisation about providing a nationally accredited management course for co-operative managers and others involved in managing co-operatives.

The registered training organisation offers faster accreditation than those courses that require managers to complete a set number of subjects, regardless of their existing knowledge.

By using what is known as 'competency-based assessment', managers receive credits for skills they use in their everyday work. Managers are assessed at the beginning of the course and only undertake study in areas that require further development.

Generally, workshops are conducted every fortnight at a venue that is convenient to participants. The course also uses small study groups made up of fellow managers to help people returning to studies after many years.

It is envisaged that the generic Diploma of Management course will be customised for the co-operative sector, using a co-operative textbook and providing co-operative and industry-specific case studies.

Further details will be provided as they become available. In the meantime, please contact me if you are interested in this proposal and would like to know more.

– Graeme Charles, Executive Officer

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attendance increasing every year since the meal's introduction, according to the co-operative's secretary.

- Producers Co-operative in Texas served a barbecue dinner to 1800 people at its last AGM. The secret was in the organisation – 16 buffet lines had the crowd seated in around 30 minutes.
- A buffet-style meal has helped draw more than 1000 members to Concho Valley Electric Co-operative's AGM in San Angelo, Texas.

Song, dance and sparkling speakers

- A big-name speaker can certainly attract a larger number of members to an AGM.
- "Budget for quality entertainment – and make sure you've heard the entertainment first," says Kent Miller of Farmway Co-operative in Beloit, Kansas. Be prepared to spend some money.
- With great entertainment and a buffet dinner, the AGM can become a community social event.

Short on business, long on dividends

Most co-operative meeting planners recommend keeping the actual business to a minimum.

Some, however, use the business session to present employer/director service awards and acknowledge community service.

- Penasco Valley Telephone Co-operative awards 10 college scholarships at its AGM, an activity that generates goodwill and positive publicity.
- More and more co-operatives are presenting dividend or rebate cheques to members during their AGMs.
- Be prepared to address business or policy issues of widespread concern.

And a good time was had by all ...

While some co-operatives' AGMs are cut and dried, others are community social events:

- A number of electric co-operatives in Texas hold health fairs in conjunction with their meetings. These fairs have been especially popular with older members, who have welcomed free cholesterol screenings and blood pressure checks.
- Other Texan electric co-operatives have invited local vendors to set up booths at their meetings as a community service.

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- A networking breakfast kicked off the last AGM of the National Livestock Producers Association in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The aim was to help board members become better acquainted with staff and services. During breakfast, the chairman of each service committee briefly described the co-operative's services.

Fridges and fifty-dollar bills

Giveaways are almost as important to AGM attendance as free food, according to the survey.

Some co-operatives give a gift to every member who registers, others offer door prizes, and some give both.

- "Cash prizes are probably the biggest factor in our AGM attendance, and we promote them in our publicity materials," says Patti Beckham of Lone Star Land Bank in Weatherford, Texas. This co-operative gives away 15 \$50 cash prizes and one of \$250. That's in addition to the \$10-\$15 gift, that each member receives.
- Farmway Co-operative's door prizes are \$50 and \$100 gift certificates for merchandise in the co-operative store.
- Remember spouses. Planters Co-operative discovered the popularity of cookbooks when it gave them to members at their AGM. "Women, who aren't usually all that interested in the co-operative business, were just thrilled," says controller Jill Cain. "Others who heard about the cookbook later, came up to us and told us they would have attended too if they'd known about the book."
- Producers Co-operative always offers sizable door prizes, such as microwave ovens and compact refrigerators, which can be used by the entire family, and are gender-neutral.

It considers it important to present the entertainment, followed by the door prizes, at the end of the meeting, so that members leave with positive memories.

Day versus night

If members have to travel a long distance to the AGM, an afternoon meeting often works better than one in the evening.

Location, location, location

Where would you rather attend a co-operative dinner meeting? A sweaty gymnasium or a nicely decorated hotel meeting room?

Attendance at one Texas co-operative's AGM more than doubled when it moved the meeting from the local high school cafeteria, where donuts and cokes were served, to a classier restaurant. Within a few years, the co-operative outgrew the restaurant and moved its meeting to a larger venue.

VCN – a valuable tool

By David Griffiths

This is a summary of the key finding of the *Victorian Co-operative News* (VCN) survey – most members have responded that VCN is read and readable.

The number of member co-operatives interviewed was 38, or 59% of the total membership, compared with the 20-25% response rate for previous CFV member surveys and the 2% response rate for the NCU survey.

(The differing response rates reflect the effectiveness of the one-on-one telephone survey approach used for this survey, as opposed to the mailed out form used in the other two surveys)

The response rate was 90%, if expressed as a percentage of members who were contacted. The missing 10% were not available or contactable for various reasons.

VCN's target group is co-operative directors. However, we have not had any objective evidence of whether or not we were achieving this objective. We now know that the majority of our readers are directors.

The critical issue

The critical issue about VCN is whether it benefits members and whether members perceive and accept it as a benefit.

To help establish the nature of this benefit, the survey focused at three critical inter-related issues:

- layout and design;
- content readability; and
- accountability.

Layout and design

A newsletter's layout can be a turn-on or a turn-off. Members were asked to rate the layout of VCN and 85% reported that it was excellent, very good or good.

Excellent	5	12%
Very good	12	29%
Good	18	44%
Average	6	15%
Poor	0	0
Very poor	0	0



Readability

Just as a newsletter's layout and design can be a turn-on, so its language and article style can be a turn-off. Members were asked, therefore, how they rated VCN's readability and 90% classified it as very easy or easy.

Very easy	12	29%
Easy	25	61%
Very difficult	0	0
Difficult	0	0
Balanced	4	10%
Other	0	0

Accountability

VCN is an important source of information about CFV activities. Members were asked, therefore, whether VCN kept them adequately informed about the CFV's activities and 76% reported that this was mostly achieved:

Mostly	31	76%
Sometimes	2	5%
Varies	5	12%
Often	0	0
Don't know	3	7%

Differences

Responses were received from managers and directors of member co-operatives and we were interested to establish whether there were key differences between them about the content of articles in VCN.

There were some differences between the 25 managers and 16 directors who responded to the survey.

On governance articles, for example, nine of the 16 directors (56%) and 17 of the 25 managers (68%) reported that governance articles were essential or important.

On co-operative values, 12 of the 16 directors (75%) and 13 of the 25 managers (52%) reported that articles about co-operative values were essential or important.

Continuous improvement

The survey will help us to further improve the relevance of VCN to our members. We appreciate the feedback from those members who took the time to participate in our survey.

CFV news

– September /
October 2001 –

Rupnorth Co-operative

Rupnorth Co-operative's primary activities are to provide insurance, fertilisers, chemicals and general merchandise to members.

It was established in 1970 by seven farmers between Rupanyup and Minyip, in the Wimmera, who banded together to purchase a 'delver' for cleaning channels after the 1969 drought.

Membership was chiefly smaller farmers and it proved relatively easy to obtain discounts for sizeable purchases by combining their purchasing requirements.

Out of this grew the concept of forming a co-operative.

Forming a co-operative

The first official meeting was held in the now-closed Rupanyup North School.

To join, members took up 1200 shares worth \$1 each, and paid an annual membership fee.

From then on, members were required to spend at least \$2000 a year on insurance, fertilisers, fuel, chemicals or general merchandise.

Since its formation, Rupnorth's membership has grown from seven to a high of 130. Its membership is

now 60 and it has five directors, including an independent director.

Post-formation

Rupnorth first marketed member's grain during the 1990 season. From then on its barley deals grew and the co-operative rented a storage bunker in 1996.

In the same year, Rupnorth also negotiated a deal on a parcel of chick peas. The structure of the deal was successful, but it failed because the co-operative's board could not agree to sell the chick peas at the negotiated price.

During this time, Rupnorth opened a 'shop front' where all the products it dealt with were available to members, as well as agronomy advice. The shop had three full-time employees, including an executive officer, and Rupnorth turned over several million dollars a year.

After the frost in 1998, some members started questioning the validity of Rupnorth's business direction.

A consultant's business analysis and plan recommended closing the shop, dismissing the employ-

ees and selling all Rupnorth's assets.

Membership fees were also to be paid up-front each year, as an alternative to charging commission on sales effected through the co-operative by members, regardless of whether members used the co-operative.

Over the next six months, half the membership resigned, unable to justify the cost of membership while not using the co-operative. This transition changed Rupnorth's outlook and made the remaining members committed to its success.

A new executive officer has been appointed and members are primed for changes in grain marketing associated with the industry's impending deregulation.

The board is also putting together an education program that will address issues such as quality assurance, management and marketing training.

Rupnorth believes it has a lot to offer through joint ventures and networking arrangements, but it recognises the value of its members, improving their understanding via courses that focus on what happens outside the farmgate.

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